Unidentified Man Is Star Salesman for Signal Oil

He's "The Whistler." He now out-points, in Hooperatings, two dozen other murder mysteries being offered to Pacific Coast audiences. The stories he tells follow a formula carefully developed by the advertiser and his agency.

With more than two dozen mystery shows competing, top Hooperatings are now going to the CBS thriller "The Whistler," broadcast to Pacific Coast cities, plus Spokane, Phoenix and Reno, sponsored there by the Signal Oil Co.

Top rating so far, 21.3; standing at the moment, 20.1; average the past 18 months, 14.5.

"The Whistler" has so many fans that Jack Benny picked it for parodying last fall.

This interesting mystery program has been sponsored from sustaining days by an oil company that previously had the best musical variety program on the Coast, the "Signal Carnival." That ran seven years, and was stopped only by rising talent costs.

In its regional market this company has larger competitors with radio programs, to say nothing of national oil programs.

The petroleum industry is definitely radio conscious. Then how has this company won and held leadership for 11 years? "It *is* considered unique for one advertiser to have had the two top programs on the Pacific Coast for such a length of time," is the modest admission of Signal executives.

My word—yes! But what is the formula? Could anybody use it?

No Seers!

Flash back to the days of 1943 when "The Whistler" was on sustaining, we discover that numerous sponsors considered it—negatively. Columbia writers, producers and actors were putting their hearts into what looked like a good idea, but nobody saw, in the crystal ball, "The Whistler" as he would be a year later.

Signal was on the hunt for a show to replace its "Carnival," and its advertising manager, H. E. Ransford was working closely with the Barton A. Stebbins Advertising Agency, aided by a viewpoint. That viewpoint, evolved during experience with the "Carnival," that you are not likely to stumble onto a top-notch show on sustaining, but there are good chances that you will find the *makings* of a topper.

Possibilities were seen in "The Whistler," although it was radically "different" in character. Everybody buys gasoline and oil. The right show must be one that would attract a large audience.

"The Whistler" today is produced by George Allen, Columbia producer, under the supervision of E. C. ("Ed") Bloodworth, radio director for the Stebbins agency. And it is practically created from week to week. Days are spent on script, ideas and suggestions, to make a show that is considered different from any mystery on the air, including transcontinental shows.

Why Is He Popular?

Mr. Bloodworth lists six standards that seem to account for much of the program's listener popularity, but warns that it is hard to pin down popularity to rules:

1. Minimum horror
2. Maximum characterization
3. Always a surprise twist
4. Always a logical story
5. Romantic incidents
6. Normal characters

"The Whistler" has proved that horror and spine-tickling characters are not necessary to an interesting mystery play. This one has no screams, gasps, chokings or any other unpleasant night-marish effects—and still the customers tune in in ever-increasing numbers. As the hour is 9 P.M., only the older children can listen.

The story is always acted by strong characters, distinguished by their contrasting voices. The characters in themselves must hold the audience. "The Whistler" never enters the story, but is the narrator, and the strongest character of all—always present. He knows everything and everybody. Secrets and motives cannot be hidden from him. He is omnipresence personified. And his identity is never disclosed.

"Life itself is stranger than the most fantastic fiction," says "The Whistler." "Now, there was Norma Cortley, who played her beauty for high stakes, and for a time won, until one day . . ." Thus a typical story begins.

Is there a new trend in all radio shows? Do we hear even the comedians who have depended on gags now calling in the story writers to weave the gags into episodes? Radio has lived 20 years on vaudeville—is it now being transformed into theatre? Well, whatever — this mystery show is on that beam.

The surprise twist, the "O. Henry ending," adds effectiveness to the coherent story that is considered indispensable for this program. The story is always natural. At pivotal points, it must never solve problems by a missing will, or a hunch, or a suddenly found rich uncle. Take those devices away from your writers, and it is plain that they must come in with a logical story.

The "Twist"

The surprise twist usually develops out of a strong story. For example, crime is always punished—and not only that, but outsmarts itself. It is seldom necessary to bring in a policeman. Back somewhere in the story the criminal dropped the seed of his own punishment, and then watered and cultivated it, until with a shock, the listener hears everything click—and there, naturally, is your surprise twist.

In a closely-knit advertising and marketing program, "The Whistler" has his own place. The Signal Oil Co. uses newspapers, regional magazines, painted outdoor posters for quality, painted wall signs for low-cost coverage, and various other media. It skilfully separates gasoline and motor oil advertising for specific purposes, and checks results by consumer research.

Gallonage is the yardstick on gasoline advertising. Before the war the slogan was "You do go farther with Signal gasoline." Motorists tested that claim during the days of rationing, and Signal gallonage rose during the war. In motor oil, the decreasing supplies of Pennsylvania "lubes" led the company to put a separate campaign behind its own Western motor oil, also with rising sales.

Consumer research constantly quizzes consumers to find out whether the word "Signal" means to them a traffic light, a railroad crossing, or a brand of gasoline; whether the

company's bull's-eye trade-mark is spotted in a picture; what the words "Go farther" suggest; what oil company stands highest with each individual.

Despite fluctuations in gallonage, it has been found that Signal advertising does make the desired impression, and is remembered, and justifies the expenditure. Opinions are never accepted when it is possible to go and ask the public for facts. Yet, almost no direct checking is done on the "Whistler," other than by C. E. Hooper, Inc., which is utilized by nearly every advertiser on the air. If a new station is added, or the time changes, as with the West Coast's semi-annual shifts to compensate for daylight saving time, there will be newspaper announcements. But no inquiring reporter quizzes people to measure listenership, nor are any reports solicited from Signal dealers.

Signal has other radio programs, sportcasting professional baseball, football, basket-ball, ice hockey. These are checked because it is essential to know what sports are most popular, and to plan for the future. But aside from its general popularity, indicated in Hooperatings, the mystery program is left to sell petroleum products on its popularity—which after all is reminder value.